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What is the CNT?
English translation of ¿Qué es la CNT? introduction to the
Spanish anarcho-syndicalist union the CNT-AIT.
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# What is the CNT?

**English translation of ¿Qué es la CNT? introduction to the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist union the CNT-AIT.**

Confederación Nacional del Trabajo de España

May 2011

We are the organized Working Class. Our most enjoyed assets are Liberty and Dignity. We aren't afraid of anything. We are going to change the world.

## We are the CNT

An Anarcho-syndicalist Union, where we organize workers as equals, to defend ourselves against labor and social aggressions; in which we are ourselves, without executive committees, *liberados* or leaders, we make the decisions on our problems and aspirations

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*Original Spanish text here. Translated for libcom.org May 2011.*

Think about the so called work accidents that leave a thousand dead each year, who are the responsible if not the entrepreneurs without scruples and the rulers more interested in money than life?

For that the CNT doesn't just fight for four quarters more, that in the end the inflation eats away, it fights for a different kind of world.

## What type of world do we want?

It's great the way it is – you're thinking – but what is it that we really want? We want what they say all the time: peace; liberty; the fruit of our labor, we want that those that don't work but are able to do so, don't eat; that in any part of the world any person can be useful by working, living in a house, going to school, to have their seat in the feast of life…

But for that to arrive, you need to end the causes of inequality. Charity is worth nothing. Centuries of charity have done nothing to bring justice, because the cause of all evil, of violence, is the existence of huge wealth in the hands of bankers, businessman and the State.

We want a society without State, which does not assign the power, the violence or the exploitation of some over others.

## Who are we?

We don't fool anyone, we are what we want to be, not what they want us to be.

And this is what we are: wage-earners, retirees, housewives, unemployed, students, immigrants, etc… men and women that above the differences in ideology, race, gender, age, professional category…, gather strengths to face our foes.



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- we oppose big and small nationalism, so many times used to attack workers in the name of abstractions such as nation and fatherland;
- we want a country where you don't crowd almost sixty thousand prisoners in jails as a result of a system that creates crime and right after creates criminals;
- we want a libertarian education in which boys and girls and educated in a system of values far from competiveness and consumerism;
- we fight against religious… manipulations and superstitions;
- we support all that furthers people's freedom, from all that inequality stops, all that unites us as brothers.

## But that is not enough

To make more money, to have a stable job and that there are good services in the area, that is good. But if you look hard, you'll see that the world is badly divided.

We have available resources that we never had before in mankind's history: knowledge, energy, means of communication… And we are still surrounded by plagues: famines, wars, racism, unemployment, walls, terrorism, and abuses of power. That happens nearby, right here.

And the causes are known: privileges in the hands of individuals, that employ violence without punishment, supported by the State apparatus and its means of repression.

The toughest gangster is an angel, in comparison with the group of plutocrats and leaders that organize wars, who live in luxury and receive the pope's blessing in Vatican hearings.

## Our labor demands

And when we negotiate on what do we do it? We have some minimal demands that we take to all our struggles, for instance: we want linear pay increases that benefit those that receive lower salaries; we want increases in the amount of base salary and not in the complements; we refuse to work overtime and on order; we are against the new working systems that imply suppression of positions, versatility and functional and geographical mobility; we fight to brake the chain that ties us to the corporate machine, by decreasing the working day, increasing vacation and leisure time, advancing retirement to the age of 55; we seek for the syndicate to control what the worker produces, denying its seal of approval to damaged or low quality products; we urge that workers, their assemblies and their syndicate sections hold bargaining rights; we ask for authentic Union freedom, which means the elimination of subsidies to Unions and to be allowed Union activity within companies without restrictions.

## Our social demands

We don't solely operate in the field of labor, but the social is a part of our lives as well:

- we propagate full equality between men and women;
- we desire an economic development that doesn't devastate the planet and depletes its resources enhancing ecology;
- we are anti-militarism because there is no war that is just, since all wars cause pain and death to the weak while the powerful get richer;
- we reject the discriminations based on gender, appearance, race;



## What is the CNT?

Founded in 1910 in Barcelona, from the trade unions not intertwined with social-democratic currents, the CNT still follows the anarcho-syndicalist principles and is the only heir in the Spanish State of the spirit of the First International.

The CNT is today the only Union in the Spanish State completely independent from political guidelines, where those who make the decisions are the affiliated workers and not a comity of professionals of syndicalism, we refuses State funding and patronage in order to keep economical independence, and as to not leave negotiations in the hands of middle-men.

## What is a Trade Union?

A Union is an association of workers who try to improve their life conditions, both material and cultural. If you are a worker (active, unemployed, retired,...) and you think that this life isn't giving you all you deserve, that your job doesn't allow you to grow as a person, your place of action as a worker is in a Union.

## The CNT, a Union of Class

The Confederación Nacional del Trabajo is a confederation of Class Unions, which includes workers from all trades without distinction in its Union's branches. The CNT is a tool for struggle and for all of the working class.

## Who can belong to the CNT?

Any worker can be affiliated to the Union, no matter its political ideas or religious beliefs. He/She just has to accept our associative pact, and respect the decisions taken by the assembly.

The CNT is an independent organization that unites workers without distinction. To preserve that independence, the members of political parties or religious organizations cannot use the Union as a forum for propaganda nor hold positions within the organization.

Those who cannot be considered workers such as businessman, land-lords, big property holders, executives, high position managers, members of the government, etc cannot be a part of the CNT. Police officers and holders of repressive jobs in general, also cannot be affiliated to the CNT.

Finally, for the sake of coherence, we also cannot accept double militancy of workers/affiliates in other Trade Unions.

## Is the CNT like all the other existing Unions?

The CNT is different. We make of Direct Democracy our identity card. This type of democracy consists in that all decisions should always be made by those who are affected by them. Our statute guarantees that in the Union it's the assembly that makes the decisions. And in the assembly, all the words have the same weight. If you have your reasons, you can decide which path you are going to take. The CNT is a Trade Union that has many years of existence, in which it has distinguished itself during the whole way as an organization in which the decision are made from the base, in which everyone participates and in which there is freedom and equality in the exchange of ideas, opinions and initiatives. In the CNT we are equals and nobody collects money for representing the workers.

The CNT was founded in 1910 and its attractiveness is in the struggles it has made for the eight hours working day, Saturday as a non-working day, paid vacations, health insurance, retirement, right to strike and the obligatory employing of those without work. It has promoted shift covering. It funded schools, libraries and newspapers. It fought against fascism. Lastly it has collectivized



> the electoral programs and you better shut up and be submissive, maybe that way you can get some favors (instead of respect for your rights). They only want your vote and that you don't give them trouble.

The Union election and the company committees benefit the companies and government, who ultimately are their financers. With Union elections, whose origin is in the vertical elections of the Franquist Unions, companies and governments achieve spokesman so as not have to speak with workers directly. These legal spokesmen maintain the workers at bay, submissive and demoralized, because they are the first ones with interest in maintaining their position and they directly depend on the subsidies and *liberaciones* (the freeing of working hours by distributing them to the aggregate of workers).

## CNT, a representative Union

You may think that if you don't present yourself to those elections, you'll never be representative. That is false. You and only you are representative. When you take on your problems, you acquire representation. You have all the right to negotiate, fight and decide over what affects you. Don't believe in that story of electoral representation.

CNT is representative, because its affiliates give it representation, because when it fights its struggles are just, because its demands are those of the workers. That is to be representative, that is to have weight and that is to possess dignity. The other method, that of the elections, is nothing more than a masquerade ball in which those grotesque appear on the television signing, smiling, lecturing and giving the power to the bosses and rulers, the subsidies are divided among them.

want professionals paid by the companies. We don't want middlemen. We don't want more resources than our own, those who come from our ranks and collective will. Let's see why.

## The Union elections and the company committees

The law stipulates that in order to be a "Representative" Union it needs to present itself to Union elections in which syndicate delegates and company committees are elected. The CNT does not participate in those elections and proposes their boycott for the following reasons:

- If you are precarious or work in a small company you can't even participate. Only a minority of workers have Union elections.
- Depending on the elections you give to your "representatives" the power to decide, sign and negotiate for you and to impose their will and remain for four years out of your control. In exchange they are controlled by the leaders of the syndicate organizations to which they belong.
- With the elections, the syndicate organizations obtain *liberados* and subsidies due to those that stick around. In the end it's all a matter of economic interests.
- The syndicate *liberados* gradually have less in common with the workers, they tend to become professionals or to live off the salary and they only care about keeping their position, they defend their interests and not yours.
- Once they have achieved "representation", *liberados*, subsidies and some influence, you no longer interest them, forget



lands and industries in 1936 giving place to the deepest social transformation in Europe's history of the XXth century.

## The principles of the CNT

This Union follows the principles of revolutionary syndicalism:

a. The principle of self-management: We think that those who have to make decisions on the problems that affect them are themselves. If nobody works for you, nobody should make decisions for you. As such the CNT is an assembly syndicate: within it, those who always make the decisions are the assemblies of affiliates.

b. The principle of federalism: each CNT syndicate possesses autonomy to operate within its area and to confederate with the rest of the syndicates to take action with unity on the circumstances faced.

c. The principle of solidarity and mutual support: All syndicates of the CNT establish solidarity pacts with the rest of the confederation, so that all aggression faced by one will be responded fully. The same can be said for the affiliates in the syndicates.

## Proletariat Internationalism

The workers, who join syndicates, are federated in a local, regional and national level of the CNT and in turn are federated with the Trade Unions all over the world of the International Workers Association, the First International and the international association of anarcho-syndicalism. Because we know that we depend on each other at an international level, in order to face global neoliberalism and opponents of proletariat internationalism.

## The tactic of the CNT: Direct Action

The tactic of the CNT is direct action, which means that the solution to conflicts that may rise, are to be solved by the individuals affected without involvement of middle-men. We consider that this form of action allows us to learn how to behave with what affects us and as such assume responsibilities. To be anarcho-syndicalist means to take decisions, and to decide is something very difficult: it means to have problems. Because once you agree on something and you are going to put it into practice, you are going to find that your natural enemies, the businessman, will oppose you. They are interested in making you work as much as possible for the smallest payable salary. Your interest is opposed to that of "them". You want to work less and live better, that goes against their plans.

## The philosophical basis of the CNT: Anarchism

All of these assembly ideas are inspired by anarchist ideals. Anarchism is a political philosophy that asserts that society can organize itself without power, coercion and violence. We deny the need for political specialists enabled to make decisions in the name of other persons. Each individual is sovereign to decide over that which affects them. These ideas are being adopted by a multitude of groups that are tired of classical organizations based on the principle of hierarchy. The alternative ideas of self-management, participation, decentralization,..., are anarchist ideas. There's a negative, wrong, notion of anarchism as a synonymous of chaos and violence. We consider anarchy as a synonym of non imposed order, liberty and absence of coercion.

We want the radical transformation of society, the suppression of wage work and the social revolution. Our finality is Libertarian Communism, a social-economical system that brings liberty and



we do not guide ourselves by what is legal, but by what is just. A problem that is assumed by the CNT keeps being exposed until a satisfactory agreement is reached, with the consent of the judges or not. We don't stop pressuring until our strength is drained, and that isn't happening anytime soon. By not having to pay salaries to management, all our resources are employed in Union action. Thanks to that, an economically modest Union as our own enjoys a bigger budget when a request is put to the table. In an economy submerged, in precarious sectors, in small, medium and large companies, in multinationals, in public office, our Union action has displayed its efficiency. ASTILLEROS, FERROVIAL, CLECE, AVE, CODEX and hundreds of other companies have seen themselves forced to give in to the pressure of the workers and associate workers.

## The syndicate structure of the CNT

It is formed by the Union sections and by the branch and varied trades Unions, all of them operating in assemblies. These organizations function against the companies or institutions employing direct action, without middlemen, and measures of pressure are used with the goal of obtaining a series of demands, but with the sights set to, in the end, transform society.

This Union structure is completely different from the rest of the syndicate organizations, since all of them use as reference the syndicate elections and the system of company committees.

## The three No's

The CNT, in exchange, says no to elections, no to the *liberados* (syndicate "representatives" that group their working hours with those that they "represent", in order to follow their contractual obligations without actually working) and no to subsidies. We don't

## Our union action

In the conflicts the workers use their weapons:

- Procedures of denouncing, by manifestations, gatherings, protests, pamphlets, press articles, etc. that inform the citizens of the conflict, in order to make the company lose reputation.
- Procedures of boycott, in which one seek for the consumer or the companies clients, to stop consuming the product.
- Sabotage, which seeks for the offered product to stop existing.
- The strike in its multiple variants that stops the companies' production.
- Cultural procedures, very important, by means of excursions, retreats, cultural events, organization of plays, literary editions, concerts, poetry recitals, artistic exhibits, which sensitize us, who pull us away from the tavern and the television, which make us aware of the world's reality.

All conflict, in which the CNT intervenes, is gradually taken from the domain of the company, in order to become a local, regional, national and even international problem. Through Solidarity and Mutual Support the conflict leaves its restricted domain, much more people intervene in it, and so we manage to leave with our heads held high in big, medium and small companies.

## Our Union activity

We have achieved success where lawyers and unions with hundreds of thousands of Euros have failed. This is due to our demands,



equality as its fundamental values. And we think that to achieve our goals we should use methods coherent with them. Not everything goes. The end never justifies the means. If we want a free society, equalitarian and fraternal, our organization and our actions should be free, equalitarian and fraternal.

But we also think that each State aggression should be met with a response. We don't turn the other cheek nor conform to injustice. This principle of self-defense implies a confrontation with bosses and institutions. Due to all this the CNT is Anarcho-syndicalist.

The confluence of revolutionary syndicalism that propagates the emancipation of workers by themselves and the abolition of class society, and from anarchism, with its ideas of organization without hierarchy and authority, of coherence in means and ends, of instauration of Libertarian Communism, etc, comes anarcho-syndicalism.

## How does the CNT organize in a company?

By means of the *Sección Sindical*, this is the collection of workers/affiliates of CNT in a concrete company. If the company is one that employs repression, the section works clandestinely. If it follows the existing law, the syndical section operates openly.

All sections of the CNT function by an assembly. That assembly nominates a delegate that is made speaker of the company's comrades. A speaker only transmits the mandate from the assembly of the syndical section.

## *Sindicato de Ramo* (Branch Union) and *Sindicato de Oficios Varios* (Union of Varied Trades)

The different sections of the CNT from the same branch of industry form a Sindicato de Ramo (Metalworking, construction, hotel industry, commerce,…). But if there isn't enough numbers for that, sections and affiliates from several branches gather in Sindicato de Oficios Varios.

## How does the Union work?

By means of its assembly of affiliates. Every time an assembly is called, the affiliates discuss the order of the day and make agreements. There is no directive that can decide in-between assemblies. We only have a committee without executive power.

## What is the *Comité Sindical* (Union Committee)?

The syndicate's assembly nominates people to open the locals, maintain relations with the other syndicate's, receive and send correspondence, raise funds… Tasks that in general do not need the gathering of the assembly to be carried out. These people form what is called the Comité Sindical. The committee of the CNT has several limitations in order to avoid that it becomes a group of leaders.



## The limitations of the committees in the CNT

1. The members of the committee of the Union, and by extension, all committees of the CNT, cannot receive a salary for their militancy
2. All committees are mechanisms of management and coordination, for which they can make agreements. They can only carry out the decisions of the syndicate assemblies and their requests. In the case of imperative urgency or need to take action, they have to be accountable to the assembly, which will decide if its actions were correct or not.
3. All positions are revocable at any moment. The assembly is free to fire its representatives if it sees fit or seeks for the positions to be rotating.
4. The committee as such cannot make proposals to the syndicate assembly.
5. All committees have to be endorsed by the assembly behind its election. All positions are always available to the assembly.
6. Members of political parties cannot hold positions in the CNT.
7. In all assemblies the committees have to explain the procedures made by the different desks.
8. The committees of the CNT do not have opinions. When they speak they do so in the name of the organization in its entirety and its agreements.

The committee of the CNT is only a mechanism of relations and administration, not a group with power.